Telegraph
17/4/67

Kennedy: a Death Diminished

WASHINGTON.

A BOOK out today* is called "The Death of a President." It is meant as history, but circumstances have made it a feature in a performance that could be entitled "The Assassination of President Kennedy as depicted by William Manchester and other characters caught up in a play under nobody's direction."

President Kennedy was real, and his murder was real. This book and the controversy surrounding it are, unwittingly, closer to the stuff of theatre.

The mood of the book, the anguished scenes among those involved with it and the competition for the sympathy of the audience have been less the drama of real events than the forced encounters and sharpened emotions of a cast responding to the dictates of a playwright.

The particular distinction is that there has been no playwright, simply a captive cast at the mercy of an audience it created for itself. The Kennedys and their entourage have been the hapless victims of a force they had prided themselves on mastering: mass communications and all the techniques and devices that are used to employ it for the rapid creation of public reputations.

When the business of the book started all those now so embittered were friends or friendly acquaintances.

Mrs. Kennedy felt that at least one book should be written about the assassination that would be a reliable guide for history as she saw it. The stampede for the mass market had already started among those concerned for President Kennedy's reputation, or their own, or both, or a quick profit.

Spiritual Torment

President Kennedy's character and record will bear examination, but public relations had created around his personality the aura that envelops a fine actor performing at the height of his powers, and it was this that his family tried to preserve.

The balance came down on the side of public relations rather than historical assessment, whether those involved at the time fully appreciated their own motives or not. The unpaid commission to write the authorised version was given to William Manchester, who had written an adulatory magazine "profile" some years earlier.

It was understood that other writers would be actively discouraged while Mr. Manchester was at work, and he allowed himself to be bound by an arrangement with Senator Robert Kennedy that publication would depend on the family's approval.

Mr. Manchester has spoken since of his duty as an historian and of the public's right to know the facts, but it is clear that from the outset he saw himself as a figure in a drama, emotionally involved almost beyond endurance in rendering a service to a beloved dead leader.

Since completing his book his accounts of his efforts in compiling it have been filled with details of his mental and spiritual suffering, of the mutual torment of interviewing people and of his going back to his Washington flat at the end of the day to weep into the night.

From the first page to the last, he has said, he "lived in a state of continuous shock." When the troubles with the Kennedy family erupted "the attemped coercion was real enough and as a scholar of Germany under National Socialism I perceived a kind of American *Nacht und Nebel Erlass.*"

An author who feels he is living under an equivalent of that fearful Hitlerian order for the elimination of opponents, or who will use such a phrase to describe whatever he felt, can be expected to produce a book more notable for its vivid writing than its precision of fact or calmness of judgment.

By
VINCENT RYDER

His book picks no important quarrel with the findings of the Warren Commission, though it makes such gratuitous assertions as that Oswald went mad the night before the assassination, of which there is no demonstrable proof.

It carries a note that neither Mrs. Kennedy nor Senator Robert Kennedy has in any way approved or endorsed the contents. Parts to which they objected most strongly were excised before publication. There can be little deleted material that has not been public knowledge for many weeks, quite apart from inaccurate gossip about anecdotes never there in the first place.

Few efforts to secure privacy or discretion can have been conducted so publicly or so indiscreetly. Others who have not chosen to try to make the machinery of mass communication serve their purpose retain the privilege of fighting their quarrels in private and later forgetting their grievances or carrying them quietly to the grave. The Kennedy family has chosen otherwise, and in this episode paid the penalty.

If the first mistake was in not arranging for the book to be an independent, cool historical account, the worst mistake was in allowing the whole affair to become a clumsy exercise in public and political relations. The family's coterie of specialists are familiar with the mechanics of the craft, but they were at a loss to cope simultaneously with their sympathy for the family's private feelings, their worry about political "images," Mr. Manchester's emotional combativeness and the voracious public appetite for Kennedyiana so sedulously fostered in earlier years.

The manuscript was subjected to rough take-out-and-put-back surgery by numerous hands in an effort to decide what should be presented to a public that in fact was receiving a running commentary on the progress of the operation. One sniff of dispute between Mr. Manchester and the family was enough to stir up sufficient interest in the Press, radio and television to ensure that the principals who hoped to manage the public response to the book became the players in an unscripted melodrama.

Responding to the pressures, they filled the air with "leaks," charges, counter-charges, formal statements, authorised statements by "sources close to" somebody or other, denials, and a babble of anonymous comment. . . . The manuscript would damage President Johnson. It would damage Senator Kennedy by being an unfair attack on Mr. Johnson. The publishers were shocked by parts of it. The publishers thought it was a masterpiece. Mr. Manchester had broken his agreement with Senator Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy had approved publication. Mr. Kennedy had not, and so on.

Bit by bit the controversial parts cropped up in print until the advance publicity for the book, the last thing the Kennedys wanted, reached its climax in the lawsuit and the settlement on deletions.

Mr. Johnson decided there was a great deal to be said for saying nothing. He made no public statement and no private comment intended to find its way to the public. He permitted none by his aides. It has been a wise policy.

In retrospect, the Kennedy family might have saved themselves a lot of heartache if they had seen at an early stage that matters were getting beyond their control. If Mrs. Kennedy and Senator Kennedy had brought themselves to read the manuscript early instead of late, after their advisers had spent months tinkering with it, they could perhaps

*"*The Death of a President*: Nov. 20—Nov 25, 1963." By William Manchester. (Michael Joseph, 60s.)*

have persuaded the author to delete what eventually was deleted and then washed their hands of the rest with a "publish and be damned" disclaimer.

Sympathy for Mrs. Kennedy has been modified by suspicions that she tried to treat historical fact as personal property. Americans like the style of aristocracy but not an assumption of natural authority: Camelot is fine so long as the servants are not given hell for answering back

Contest in Imagery

Senator Kennedy may be no worse off politically in the long run if the mystique surrounding his brother's administration is eroded by a public surfeit of nostalgia. It would enable him to be more himself and less his brother's brother.

Yet, apart from and despite the business of the book, a massive exercise in theatrical-style public relations continues on the Senator's behalf. It employs a precise knowledge of when the giant of mass communication wakes and sleeps, what whets its appetite and what satisfies it, how event and pseudo-event can be used to keep the great public attentive week in and week out, until it is hard to know where reality leaves off and this new branch of histrionics begins.

He is reported to have said of his enriched adversaries in the book dispute: "They've got the money and we've got the public relations problem." It is not surprising that it may seem like that, since that is the context in which the episode has been conducted: a contest in imagery.

Somewhere the full sense of cold reality has been lost to public sight. The murder was of a real man who held a large part of the real world's fate in his hands. Its aftermath involves real men who now do so or who one day may do so. This is worth remembering. The real world is not a stage.